

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Public Diplomacy (with skim milk, please; no sugar) ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

Ahh, yes. This is a very American way to spend an hour: sipping coffee in Starbucks, pecking away on my laptop. OK, the experience is not entirely American. For one thing, I appear to be the only person in the store using a computer, but give it time (the manager just wandered past and told me the wireless internet access will probably be up and running next month).

Starbucks is rapidly becoming a Middle Eastern institution. Its stores have been fixtures in the shopping malls of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates for years, a fact that always made its absence from Jordan a bit puzzling. The one where I'm sitting is Jordan's first. It opened yesterday. According to the Jordan Times the staff went through an intensive three month training program "on the corporate culture and service quality and assurances expected by customers." The system isn't perfect yet, but they are getting there. "Orders! Orders! Orders!" the manager shouted to his staff (in English) as the line of people waiting for coffee slowly grew.

Aside from the fact that the place is huge – a free-standing three story building next door to what has long been Amman's trendiest coffee house – the décor and atmosphere are exactly what one usually expects in a Starbucks.

This is a pronounced change from two years ago, when talk of boycotting US firms and products was much in the news. Muslim entrepreneurs in Europe launched Mecca Cola to give consumers a soda choice that did not implicitly offer support to American policies in the region. Meanwhile the local holders of franchise rights for McDonalds and other fast-food brands were at pains to emphasize their local credentials, and to point out the number of local jobs a successful boycott would imperil.

Today it is difficult to find Mecca Cola in Amman's supermarkets, and if the crowds in my neighborhood Burger King, KFC and Pizza Hut are any guide it looks as though the boycott movement has largely run out of steam. An attempt by a Jordanian group called the Higher Committee for Protecting the Nation and Anti-Normalization to get Starbucks' business license revoked on the grounds that the company's chairman is a vocal supporter of Israel went nowhere.

It would be wrong to see the mere presence of lots of greasy fast food as a sign the region is becoming 'Americanized' – or that it is becoming more accepting of American foreign policy. But US brands from Coke and Kodak to Ford and KFC are among the most obvious aspects of American 'soft power'. The most successful ones are those that manage to adapt to local markets in ways both large (McDonalds heavily promotes a pita-bread-and-kofta sandwich in addition to their more familiar offerings) and small (Pizza Hut's pepperoni is made with beef,

not pork). It is a lesson in subtlety, and in knowing one's audience, that the US government has never really learned.

Of course diplomacy is not the same thing as selling soup. But there is a real sense that corporate America is more aware than official America these days that what you do is often more important than what you say. Telling everyone your product is wonderful does not work over the long term if the product does not perform as advertised.

So is the arrival of Starbucks a good thing or a bad thing? Considering the quality of the coffee at many of Amman's other upscale coffee bars I'm going with 'good', at least for now (and eagerly awaiting the promised wi-fi access).

grr
